

History

Aspects of Ethnic Identity in Historical-Cultural Memory of the Devskeli Gorge Population

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The paper deals with the attitude of the ethnic Georgians of the Devskeli gorge to the ethno-cultural values of the native people. Devskeli gorge historically played an important role in the socio-political and cultural life of southwest Georgia. Due to the historical situation, the villages of the gorge came under the Turkish Republic, which naturally changed their ethnic environment. Despite living in a foreign political-economic and socio-cultural environment for a long time, the local population has preserved various important markers of ethnic identity, which is evidenced by the current historical-ethnographic existence of the gorge, culture, and Georgian speech. The purpose of our research was, on the one hand, to study the traditions, rituals, celebrations, folklore, family and public relations, attitudes towards traditional values that have survived in the still living ethnographic existence of the Devskeli gorge, and, on the other hand, the research of the archaic elements preserved in the historical memory of the ethnic Georgians of the Devskeli gorge, which have disappeared from the ethnographic existence of Georgians or preserved as a faint remnant. Thus, this is an important material for reconstructing the archaic archetype of rituals. The specific signs that emerged as a result of the historical transformation of existence in Devskeli gorge have also been studied. The research showed that for the residents of the Devskeli gorge living in a foreign environment, the determination of ethnic belonging became the loyalty to the traditional values of the native nation, preservation of elements of the Georgian language, material and spiritual culture, that makes them feel like a part of their native nation, a bearer of its traditional values. © 2024 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

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The Devskeli gorge was the advanced region of the historical Ligani/Nigali gorge and included the territory from both sides of the Devskelistskali river, from the Tetrtskali yaylas to the town of Borchkha. Information about the Devskeli gorge can be found in ancient historical sources, as well

as in the notes and press of Georgian and foreign travelers of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (D. Bakradze, E. Takaishvili, S. Aslanishvili-Bavreli, G. Kazbegi, Z. Chichinadze, J. Murie, E. Veidenbaum, A. Frenkel, V. Lisovsky). The available data clearly show

that this region, with its geographical location, has always played an active role in the economic, cultural and political life of southwestern Georgia, and without its scholarly study, it is impossible to have a complete idea of the history, ethnology, folklore and dialectology of southwestern Georgia. However, this time our interest was aroused by the defining aspects of the national identity preserved in the villages of the Devskeli gorge (Araveti, Shuakhevi, Devskeli, Bagini, Ebrika, Adaguli).

National identity is formed by an ethnonym, common myths about ancestors, common historical memory, cultural identity, connection with a certain historical territory and the individual's identification with this heritage and elements [1]. All aspects of ethnic identity have been well preserved by the people of Devskeli gorge and they still have a sense of commonality with these values. The dynamics of the cultural-historical memory of the ethnic Georgians living in Turkiye can be clearly seen by studying the traditional existence of the population of the gorge, those ontological and pragmatic strategies, which, in the conditions of coexistence with the dominant culture, were developed by the inhabitants of the valley to preserve the traditional paradigms of ethno-culture.

Devskeli valley is the part of historical Georgia, which in the middle of the 16th century, together with other Georgian territories, was conquered by the Ottoman Empire conducting the transformation of the national consciousness in different ways. In 1878, this territory was returned to the motherland, but in 1921, according to the agreement of the Soviet and Turkish government, it again came under Turkiye. Based on the historical situation, for centuries the existence of the people here developed in a foreign ethno-cultural environment, in a different political space. As far as they did not experience displacement, the change of the ethno-cultural and linguistic boundaries of this region, Devskeli gorge remained as a kind of "cultural oasis" within foreign ethnic environment [2].

Devskeli Georgians preserved not only traditional elements of intangible cultural heritage characteristic of Georgian ethnographic existence, but also such archaic components that have disappeared in Georgia itself. Their research provides us with additional ethnographic material for studying the genesis of many holidays and clarifying the importance of rituals. One of these elements is the May 7 rituals. May 7 is considered a magical day in Ajara, but no ritual has been observed in Ajara, apart from the fact that on this day they wet their heads with rain in order to make their hair grow well. Whereas in Devskeli gorge, many narratives and customs are connected with May 7, it is called "Tsotskhoba" ("Broom-day"). It is believed that on this day 7 mulberries will fall on the ground, you should make 7 bundles of grass, you should get wet, etc. According to tradition, there are mineral waters in the "Tsotskhoba" place, in which you should bathe on May 7. According to another custom, on this day they also went to "Gogo Mezir" (grave), where there were two holy springs. It was considered necessary to drink this water and to bathe in it, after which they would leave a twisted thread here, meaning – "let my illness stay here". It can be seen that "Tsotskhoba" is a complex of rituals based on the belief in the magical power of water, of which only the custom of wetting the hair has survived in Ajara. However, the rituals recorded in Devskeli's daily life provide additional ethnographic material for the restoration of the ancient fragments of the archaic beliefs and representations of Georgians in this holiday and the mythical content forgotten in Ajara [3].

From the point of view of preservation, the traditional holiday Shuamtoba, which is widespread both in Ajara and in the yaylas of Devskeli gorge, provides very interesting material. The holiday, with various accompanying rituals, was held in the middle of the stay on the mountain. In terms of content, these holidays are identical, but in Devskeli gorge, more moments of the holiday have

been better preserved to this day. In Ajara, Shuamtoba is also called Memkhlianoba and is discussed in one complex, while the Devskeli material shows us that these were two separate differentiated holidays. In this gorge, the Shuamtoba/Marioba festival was preceded by the Memkhlianoba/Menkhlianoba ritual, which meant collecting wild species of edible herbs. On Memkhlianoba, they used to go to the mountains, after 10 days of arriving to the yaylas. That Memkhlianoba, had the purpose of a magical ritual can be seen in the following custom prevalent in Devskeli villages/yaylas: women who went to collect edible herbs would climb “Star Mountain” and, despite the fact that the water in the lake at 3000 meters a.s.l. is very cold, the young women would bathe, and the old ones would sing and dance at that time. All these elements allow not only to explain the magical purpose of the ritual and to restore its original form, but also to differentiate the rituals preserved in the form of a single holiday in Ajara [4].

The traditional existence of Devskeli people on summer pastures – yaylas, which actually represent a monument of ethno-cultural heritage, is characterized by special authenticity. The terraced structure characterizes the seasonal settlement on the yaylas. The houses scattered on the hillside are oriented towards the roads leading deep into the settlement. Both old and new types of dwellings are confirmed in the settlement. The old type of houses is a type of seasonal dwelling of Ajara mountain – „a two-story log house“. In contrast to the wooden houses found on the hills/pastures of Ajara, on the yaylas/pastures of the Devskeli gorge, there are houses built with mixed materials. The main residential part of the house is built of wood, and the walls of the cattle stall are made of dry sequences of unprocessed stone. At present, most of the old yayle buildings are abandoned and destroyed.

The compact development of the villages of the Devskeli gorge is represented by modern two- or

three-story buildings and houses built using the timber-framed (pakhverkuli) construction technique, which is close to the Laz tradition. Houses built with a timber-framed technique of bricks and poles in the villages of the Devskeli gorge were built not only by Laz, but also by Machakhleli craftsmen. From the point of view of planning and spatial organization, houses of “Ajarian” and “Laz” type are confirmed in Devskeli gorge. The segmentation of rooms on two sides of the corridor in the center, characteristic of “Ajarian” residential houses, and the central planning of Laz type houses, accentuation of a wide, large sitting hall, connecting the rooms to this hall directly or through a half corridor, is an example of the continuity of traditions [5].

In almost all the villages of Devskeli gorge, there are preserved agricultural buildings: barn, granary, arbor, etc. They are built on wooden poles or on a stone foundation with a log-plank or log-framed arrangement. The abundance of buildings, the construction system, and their widespread use even today prove the sustainability of folk building traditions.

An example of the memory of material culture is the preservation of the traditions of folk needlework – weaving-embroidery, which is mainly practiced by middle-aged women, especially during the period of being on the pastures. Traditional types of weaving-embroidery, technical methods and working tools have been preserved to this day. In contrast to the Ajarian embroideries known for their ornamental and figurative images, the priority here is given to ornamental décor [5].

In the ethnic self-awareness, it is very important to preserve in the memory of the people of Devskeli gorge several signs related to the territorial space of historical Georgia – Gurjikafi at Erzurum, Rkiskari, Gurji Boghazi, as well as the stories related to Queen Tamar and others. A separate factor determining ethnic identity was witnessed among the population – the names of the temples (Mariamsminda, Eliastsminda) and their founders – the

daughter of Gurji King, Elia the son of Artanuji King. The inhabitants of the gorge have preserved features of the Georgian identity that we have already forgotten – knowledge of the folk calendar, weather forecasting, units of measurement and weight, the decimal system of counting and others [6].

Knowledge of key values and norms characteristic of ethnic Georgians can be seen, especially, in marital relations. The betrothal verified by ethnographic materials, unlike the Georgian tradition, has two stages: a small one (gifting a ring placed on a kerchief) and a big betrothal (bringing a bokhcha – a bundle of jewelry). The good-messenger (makharebela) is presented with a rather broad and original function, which provides the basis for revealing the archetypal variant of this institution and for a diversified interpretation. Messengers went to the bridegroom's family in two stages. In the first case, they took the received gifts to their representative best men, and then they usually visited the bridegroom's family [7]. The best source of reconstruction of the traditional Georgian wedding is the different rule of the “groom testing“. Instead of “catching the cushion“ common in Ajara, the grooms, for testing, were made to lift the table when entering the bride's room, by the maids of honor.

The tradition of writing dowry books, the so-called “defteri” (“notebooks“), has been preserved in the population of Devskeli. The post-wedding stages are also common-Georgian. Among the locals, a rather sacralized custom of the son-in-law arriving back to bride's house was witnessed in connection with his first visit to new relatives, during which the son-in-law would “bring some money for milk“ to his mother-in-law, and in return, the mother-in-law would serve a ritual dish – “red eggs“.

From the point of view of the further study of the genesis of the custom of diversion known in ethnological science, the materials collected in the Devskeli gorge are an important source: In “Holy

Zloba//Drzloba“ (while being a daughter-in-law) talking to men in whispers and not with gestures, “lel-lel talk“, “puchi-puchi talk“, etc. [8].

One of the important aspects determining ethnic identity in Devskeli gorge is the Georgian language, which still functions as a family language. They are also proud that they can speak pure Georgian from three hundred years ago. In their everyday speech, archaic lexical units are heard, which are not found in modern Georgian or its dialects [9].

It is natural that the speech of the gorge is strongly influenced by the Turkish language. Nevertheless, the speech, separated from the literary Georgian, still preserved its independence and presented us with an interesting linguistic picture. In addition to linguistic interest, language is a part of the realization of the national spirit and is also a carrier of ethno-cultural aspects. The people of Devskeli identify with each other the lexical units – shvantoba//shoba, which should not be accidental. Traditionally, Shvantoba is held in August. August 28th is the feast of Assumption of Mary, and September 21st is the Nativity of the Virgin. It is significant that the inhabitants of the gorge identified these two holidays with each other. Due to the prohibition of Christian holidays, the rituals associated with different dates were combined into one holiday. The divine tradition is forgotten, but interesting aspects of their historical memory are preserved with the mentioned lexical units [10].

It is true that the names of the places in the Devskeli gorge are Turkish, but the residents well remember the Georgian names of toponyms and hydronyms, which repeat the Georgian word-formation and derivation model. Christian toponyms have survived. Locals use only old Georgian names of places in their speech [11, 12].

Due to political processes, despite being isolated from the native cultural area and being influenced by foreign ethno-cultural elements for a long period of time, the Georgians of Devskeli gorge were able to preserve their ethnic identity. In their historical-

cultural memory, the consciousness of ethnic belonging and the memory of the historical homeland, the fundamental values of the ancestors live on.

The ancient system of time and space perception, units of measure and weight, the archaic form of a separate stage of the institution of marriage (peculiarities of big and small betrothal, two stages of messengers, groom's testing, groom's first visit) were witnessed in the population of Devskeli, as well as many holidays and rituals characteristic of Georgian ethnographic life and many such archaic elements of faith-beliefs, which have already disappeared from the everyday life of Georgians. Their study provides an opportunity to restore the forgotten mythical content and traditions of the holidays.

Georgian speech is preserved in Devskeli gorge with a rich lexical fund, ancient Georgian forms of lexemes, lexical dialectics and Georgian toponyms. Despite the strong influence of the Turkish language, there are still some grammatical peculiarities characteristic of the Georgian language,

which gives an interesting picture for the differentiation of the southeastern dialects.

The traditional material culture preserved to this day (architecture of residential houses, folk crafts) presents both common-Georgian aspects as well as local peculiarities of southwest Georgia. Forms of settlement, types of lowland and highland dwellings, construction materials and techniques show similarities with Ajarian and Laz house-building traditions of the contemporary period. The memory of the Georgian (Laz, Machakhleli) builders is still preserved among the population. Traditional types of folk crafts – weaving-embroidery, technical methods and work tools have been preserved to this day.

Devotion to the fundamental values received from the ancestors of the Georgian population of the Devskeli gorge, the feeling of sharing with the past history of Georgia and belonging oneself in it, the preservation of emotional and spiritual ties with the historical homeland presented an interesting picture of the relationship between historical-cultural memory and national identity.

ისტორია

ეთნიკური იდენტობის ასპექტები დევსქელის ხეობის მოსახლეობის ისტორიულ-კულტურულ მეხსიერებაში

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ნაშრომი ეხება დევსქელის ხეობის ეთნიკური ქართველების დამოკიდებულებას მშობლიური ხალხის ეთნოკულტურულ ფასეულობებთან. დევსქელის ხეობა ისტორიულად მნიშვნელოვან როლს ასრულებდა სამხრეთ-დასავლეთ საქართველოს სოციალურ-პოლიტიკურ და კულტურულ ცხოვრებაში. ისტორიული ვითარების გამო ხეობის სოფლები თურქეთის რესპუბლიკის ფარგლებში მოექცა, რამაც, ბუნებრივია, შეცვალა მათი ეთნიკური გარემო. მიუხედავად ხანგრძლივი დროით უცხო პოლიტიკურ-ეკონომიკურ და სოციალურ-კულტურულ გარემოში ცხოვრებისა, აქაურმა მოსახლეობამ შეინარჩუნა ეთნიკური იდენტობის სხვადასხვა მნიშვნელოვანი მარკერი, რაზეც მეტყველებს ხეობის დღევანდელი ისტორიულ-ეთნოგრაფიული ყოფა, კულტურა, ქართული მეტყველება. ჩვენი კვლევის მიზანს წარმოადგენდა, ერთი მხრივ, დევსქელის ხეობის ჯერ კიდევ ცოცხალ ეთნოგრაფიულ ყოფაში შემორჩენილი ტრადიციების, რიტუალების, დღესასწაულების, ფოლკლორის, ოჯახური და საზოგადოებრივი ურთიერთობების, ტრადიციული ღირებულებებისადმი დამოკიდებულებების შესწავლა, ხოლო, მეორე მხრივ, დევსქელის ხეობის ეთნიკური ქართველების ისტორიულ მეხსიერებაში შემონახული იმ არქაული ელემენტების კვლევა, რაც ქართველთა ეთნოგრაფიული ყოფიდან გამქრალია ან მკრთალი ნაშთის სახითაა შემონახული და, ამდენად, მნიშვნელოვანი მასალაა რიტუალების არქაული არქექტივის აღსადგენად. შესწავლილია ის სპეციფიკური ნიშნებიც, რაც ტრადიციული ყოფის ისტორიული ტრანსფორმაციის შედეგად გაჩნდა დევსქელის ხეობის ცხოვრებაში. კვლევამ გვიჩვენა, რომ უცხო გარემოში მცხოვრები დევსქელის ხეობის მოსახლეობისთვის ეთნიკური კუთვნილების განმსაზღვრელად იქცა მშობლიური ერის ტრადიციული ღირებულებებისადმი ერთგულება, ქართული ენის, მატერიალური და სულიერი კულტურის ელემენტების შენარჩუნება, რაც მათ თავს მშობლიური ერის ნაწილად, მისი ტრადიციული ფასეულობების მატარებლად აგრძნობინებს.

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